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Mise en abyme, irony and visual cliché in Agnès Varda's *Le Bonheur* (1964)

Agnès Varda resorts to various types of images in *Le Bonheur*: photographs; posters; stamps; film intertext. This chapter explores how these images function within the film, what are the relationships between them and how they participate in the complex politics and aesthetics of the film. In particular I shall focus on the strategy of *mise en abyme* as defined by Dällenbach in his monograph *Le Récit spéculaire : essai sur la mise en abyme*¹ (translated as *The Mirror in the Text*²): 'a *mise en abyme* is any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it'.³ According to Dällenbach, 'its essential property is that it brings out the meaning and form of the work'.⁴ In *Le Bonheur*, one can argue that *mise en abyme* raises awareness to the different images used; it shows how they are constructed and what their effects are. Through the various instances of *mise en abyme*, the viewer is encouraged to engage with the possibility (or probability) of visual irony; to identify the representation of happiness as cliché, and, ultimately, to reject it or distance themselves from it.

Le Bonheur's context and reception: Varda's mixed signals

Released in 1964, *Le Bonheur* occupies a special niche, both in Varda's output and in Nouvelle Vague cinema. Of course, the Nouvelle Vague directors are undeniably keen on *mise en abyme*, and *Le Bonheur* is no exception in this respect. The films of Godard and Chabrol, to name but a few, are filled with mirrors and reflections of all kinds (see for instance *À bout de souffle* [1959] and *À double tour* [1959]), and so is Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961): indeed, the eponymous character is constantly trapped in an elaborate game of mirrors which attract the viewer's attention to the complexities of viewpoint and perception.⁵ In fact, the Nouvelle Vague is, arguably, to Cinema what the *fin-de-siècle* novel is to literature, namely that, through its reflexive, self-conscious quality and its fascination for *mise en abyme*⁶, it paves the way for (post)modernity.

But *Le Bonheur* mostly stands out because of the unique way in which *mise en abyme* engages with cliché and visual irony. We can certainly agree with Rebecca DeRoo that 'Varda employed a sophisticated strategy of visual irony in *Le Bonheur* that disputes the film's narrative and conservative notions of domestic harmony' (even though DeRoo's exclusively feminist focus fails to account fully for Varda's complex politics and aesthetics of irony).⁷ As we shall see, the main purpose of visual irony, as facilitated by *mise en abyme*, is to increase the viewer's awareness as to the constructed nature of the images they are seeing

¹ Lucien Dällenbach, *Le Récit spéculaire : essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris : Seuil, 1977), p. 16.

² *The Mirror in the Text*, translated by Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

³ *The Mirror in the Text*, p. 8. ['Toute enclave entretenant une relation de similitude avec l'œuvre qui la contient', *Le Récit spéculaire*, p. 18.]

⁴ *The Mirror in the Text*, p. 8.

⁵ See Roy Jay Nelson, 'Reflections in a Broken Mirror: Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7*', *The French Review*, Vol. LVI, 5, April 1983, pp. 735-743.

⁶ Let us not forget that the term was coined by Gide in the 1890s. See André Gide, *Journal 1889-1939* (Paris: Gallimard, 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1948), p. 41. Even though Gide refers to much earlier practices - from Velásquez to Shakespeare - it is no surprise that the device should be named and theorised in the 1890s, at a time when the 'novelist's novel' was particularly prevalent.

⁷ Rebecca J. DeRoo, 'Unhappily ever after: visual irony and feminist strategy in Agnès Varda's *Le Bonheur*', *Studies in French Cinema* 8: 3 (2008), pp. 189-209 [p.189].

and to deconstruct clichés (about happiness, male-female relationships, family life, consumer society). In terms of reception, this strategy backfired to a large extent. Audiences did not get *Le Bonheur*.⁸ As DeRoo put it, 'although *Le Bonheur* won the Silver Bear at the 1965 Berlin Film Festival and the 1965 Louis Delluc Prize, it remains Varda's most misunderstood film, disparaged for its seemingly antifeminist themes and opacity.'⁹ One could draw useful parallels with one of Claude Chabrol's films of the period: indeed, four years earlier, *Les Bonnes Femmes* (1960) was the victim of a somewhat similar misunderstanding/misreading. In it, Chabrol portrayed the (dull) lives of four female shop assistants in post-war Paris, one of whom ends up murdered at the end by a mysterious boyfriend. Because of the absence of a narrative voice, the representation of the tedium and banality of everyday life, as well as the lack of depth of the female characters, were interpreted by critics and audience alike as a sign of arrogance and cruelty on the director's part. Such are the potential pitfalls of second-degree narrative (and/or irony and humour). They require active participation, decoding on the viewer's part and it leaves space for some ideological overcoding or distortion to occur.

Chabrol vehemently denied the accusations of misogyny and arrogance in his treatment of the *bonnes femmes* of the title, arguing instead that his clichéd and shallow female characters were supposed to convey and denounce alienation.¹⁰ Varda, for her part, was sending very mixed signals about *Le Bonheur* in that, for a long time, she refused to acknowledge both the presence of irony and to support a feminist reading of the film. Hence the label of 'opacity' of meaning which often accompanies the film.

Le Bonheur is a demanding film for its audience, not because of some experimental formalism and anti-narrativeness which characterize some of Godard's films, but because its simple, understandable plot sounds uncanny. What Guy Austin said about *Les Bonnes Femmes*, that '[it] is perhaps above all a film which explores spectatorship. [...] it is aware of itself as a spectacle and frequently challenges the audience's expectations and desires'¹¹ is also true of *Le Bonheur*. Varda's film is a glossy (and perverse) fairy-tale in which prince charming dares to swap princesses (after his failed attempt to keep two of them) with no visible consequences: what will the viewer make of it? Both films require from the audience the identification of critical distance beyond the perceived neutrality. As Joël Magny put it when commenting on *Les Bonnes Femmes* (but his assessment works just as well for *Le Bonheur*):

Les personnages n'ont aucune profondeur [...] Le sens du film ne saurait venir d'eux et ne peut s'appréhender que dans ses structures proprement cinématographiques. L'abstraction de sa conception et de sa construction mène au plus concret: l'image et le cinéma lui-même.¹²

The characters have no depth whatsoever [...]. The meaning of the film is not to be derived from them and can only be reached through its inherent filmic structures. The fact that its conception and construction are so abstract points towards the most concrete: the image and cinema itself.

⁸ See Lee, p. [pagination]

⁹ DeRoo, *Ibid.*

¹⁰ The mise-en-scène seems to point to that, for instance in the zoo scene where the women are seen through the bars of a cage, thereby reminding the viewer that the shop in which they work (and by extension the society in which they live) also function(s) as a cage/ prison. Whatever these uneducated working-class women do, they do not stand a chance. Chabrol went as far as to say that his was 'un film profondément marxiste'. See Guy Austin, *Claude Chabrol* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 28.

¹¹ Guy Austin, *Claude Chabrol* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 28.

¹² Joël Magny, *Claude Chabrol* (Paris : Cahiers du Cinéma, Collection « Auteurs », 1987), p. 175.

The analysis will therefore focus on the ways in which Varda's own 'miroir piégeant'¹³ works, how the image is constructed and points, right from the beginning, towards the cliché and an ironic reading of *Le Bonheur*.

The sunflower as icon of irony

From the very beginning of the film, there is a playful interrogation on the nature of the image, of the spectacle we are about to engage with. Indeed, the opening credits, which show the dance of the sunflowers, can be perceived as a *mise en abyme* of the whole film. Via the playful montage and the role of the music, the sunflowers are almost anthropomorphised and, conversely, the characters from *Le Bonheur* can easily be assimilated to colourful flowers, without psychological depth, who will gracefully move about or dance in the world of the film. The sunflower (or more generally, the flower) motif is recurrent throughout the film, in the guise of various objects (yellow colander or lampshade) or real flowers and therefore encourages a symbolic reading: the sunflower is always turned towards the sun; by nature it is looking for the sun (or happiness), and this is what defines François' behaviour in the film (Thérèse herself, who wears a sunflower-printed dress at the beginning of the film, is a sunflower woman whose only sun is François). The sunflower comes to epitomise happiness itself as the title *Le Bonheur*, appearing in yellow letters above the flower, tends to suggest. But more interestingly perhaps, this fragmented sequence, made of multiple brief shots or snapshots of the sunflowers from different angles, attracts the viewer's attention on its very form, on the framing process and we are therefore encouraged to ask ourselves how this sequence relates to the rest of the film. In particular, there is one intriguing, obsessively recurrent close-up on a single sunflower (which also serves, significantly, as the opening shot of the film). In this close-up, it is the camera, i.e. the eye, the image-maker, which seems to play the role of the sun [insert image]. Therefore, more than on the sunflower, it is on the sunflower-as-image that Varda focuses, on the process or making of the sunflower. The sunflower becomes, arguably, an icon of irony and provocation. And this, of course, has a fundamental impact on our perception or interpretation of what follows, namely the representation of the family in the countryside. Rather than a family, if we are to take the hint from the opening credits, we are dealing with *the image of a happy family*, i.e. with a construct, a mere cliché.

The filmic intertext

The use of filmic intertext is another key type of *mise en abyme* in *Le Bonheur*. As film within the film, it is one of the most efficient ways of making the viewer question the status of what they are seeing. This is perhaps a more surprising or unusual practice for Varda. Indeed, critics keep discussing the relationship between her films and other arts such as photography, painting and music but much less so with cinema – see for instance Alison Smith's on Varda and the art-image¹⁴ and the section entitled 'Varda et les arts' in *Agnès Varda: le cinéma et au-delà*¹⁵. As Bernard Bastide put it, 'la culture iconique de Varda est et

¹³ Ibid., p. 174. Magny applies the phrase to Chabrol's *Les Bonnes Femmes*.

¹⁴ Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 1998, pp. 32-48.

¹⁵ *Agnès Varda: le cinéma et au-delà*, ed. by Antony Fiant, Roxane Hamery and Éric Thouvenel (Rennes : PU de Rennes, 2009).

restera essentiellement plastique, plus que cinématographique'¹⁶. This is justified by Varda's own cultural background in which painting, drama and poetry occupied pride of place, not cinema. Unlike her Nouvelle Vague contemporaries, she was not a film buff and had never written any film criticism when she started her career. As she herself admitted, 'je peux compter sur les doigts les films que j'avais vus avant vingt-cinq ans'¹⁷ and she clearly states that neither *Le Bonheur* by Marcel L'Herbier (1935) nor by Medvedkin (1934) have influenced her film¹⁸. However, in *Le Bonheur*, she resorts, in typical Nouvelle Vague fashion, to the use of filmic intertext in the guise of an extract from Jean Renoir's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1959). So, what is the diegetic function of the Renoir quotation?

Varda introduces the film in a subtle and realistic way during François and Thérèse's visit to the uncle and his family, on the way back from their picnic in the countryside. The TV is switched on, and seems, at first, to function as mere background noise. But insidiously, it comes to the fore and through a framing shot of the TV set (frame within frame), it becomes impossible for the viewer to ignore it any longer. The two main characters from Renoir's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, Professor Etienne Alexis et Nénette (played respectively by Paul Meurisse and Catherine Rouvel) are lying under a tree and the professor, reflecting on a turn of events which made him forget all about his research on artificial insemination and favour instead the joys of nature and sexual intercourse with Nénette, is saying: 'le bonheur, c'est peut-être la soumission à l'ordre naturel'. Because of the magic word 'bonheur', it is of course difficult not to see this sentence as a key or a clue (or a red herring?), playfully planted here by Varda. As an intertext, it encourages the viewer to look for parallels or differences, for some relevant/meaningful connection between the diegetic worlds of Renoir's and Varda's films. Or, to refer to Riffaterre's approach to intertextuality, the reader (or viewer in our case) identifies the 'foreign body' of the intertext, 'whose assimilation will signal or trigger the replacement of meaning by significance'¹⁹. However, 'significance' turns out to be quite cryptic: what can be seen in *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* as Renoir's philosophising, his own hymn to nature and recipe for happiness, raises many questions when one tries to connect it to *Le Bonheur* and its characters. Indeed, François and Thérèse have already submitted to the natural order, as defined in Renoir's film, insofar as they have reproduced naturally (they are parents to two picture-perfect children) and they clearly haven't lost touch with the joys of nature/sex: they are just back from their own picnic or 'déjeuner sur l'herbe' in the countryside. In other words, they have already found 'le bonheur' according to Renoir. And yet, as the rest of the film shows, submission to this type of natural order is not quite enough for one of them as François will seek to 'add up' an ingredient to this recipe for happiness. Ironically, what François longs for is a more extreme submission to or version of the 'natural' order: i.e. a world in which males are fully entitled to satisfy a few females and, possibly, have a few families (or apple-trees), all in perfect freedom and harmony. His metaphors, significantly, belong to the natural world:

Toi et moi et les petits, on est comme un champ planté de pommiers, un champ carré, bien net, et puis j'aperçois un pommier qui a poussé en dehors du champ, en

¹⁶ 'Agnès Varda, une auteure au féminin singulier', in *Agnès Varda: le cinéma et au-delà*, p. 21.

¹⁷ Pierre Murat, 'Agnès Varda par Agnès Varda', *Télérama* n° 1873, 4 décembre 1985.

¹⁸ Varda interview; DVD bonus material [*Le Bonheur*, Artificial Eye, 2011]

¹⁹ Michael Riffaterre, 'Sémanalyse de l'intertexte', *Texte*, 2 (1983), p. 173. Le lecteur repère la 'trace de l'intertexte', trace 'intratextuelle', car elle 'se trouve insérée, ou enkystée, dans le texte – corps étranger dont l'assimilation signalera le remplacement du sens par la signifiante' (p. 173). [The reader identifies an intertextual trace, which is intratextual insofar as it is inserted in or rather embedded within the text - like a foreign body that, once assimilated, will allow the replacement of *meaning* by *significance*.]

dehors du carré, et qui fleurit en même temps que nous. Ce sont des fleurs en plus, des pommes en plus, ça s'ajoute.

You and me and the children, we are like a field full of apple trees - a very neat, square field. And then, I see an apple tree which grows outside the field, outside the square, and it is in blossom, just like we are. It's more flowers, more apples; it all gets added on.

What the Renoir intertext emphasises, in my view, is how François' child-like, naive, seemingly-unconscious perversity lies in presenting as 'natural' and innocent a version of happiness that is likely to be shocking to the average viewer (especially the female viewer). And, no doubt, one of the reasons why the film is so chilling is because, once his more controversial and greedy, version of happiness²⁰ has failed, François can smoothly and effortlessly come back to a Renoirian definition, with a different woman. After all, as a (sun)flower woman, it is only 'normal' and natural that Thérèse should fade away and be replaced by another flower (see the recurrence of the vase-of-flowers motif in the film).

The filmic *mise-en-abyme* serves to emphasise the perversity of François' consumerist approach to happiness and thereby reinforces the politics of irony at work in *Le Bonheur*: i.e. the indirect questioning of a world in which the family and women are nothing but products.

Posters and adverts: the world as soap bubble

The montage underlines the ease with which we switch from poster to diegetic reality and vice-versa in *Le Bonheur*. For instance, just after one of François' visits to the post office, a close-up on a street advert for soap 'Un savon d'homme!' is immediately followed by a shot showing François shaving in front of a mirror, which makes it look like his entire life is a poster or advertisement. And, indeed, François' world is as flat and glossy as an image: he is a poster boy cast in *Le Bonheur* as a happy husband/father/representative of the working-class. A rapid sequence of snapshot-like shots gives us insights into Thérèse and François' everyday life (Thérèse's ironing, baking, sewing; the children looking cute; the close-up on the vase of flowers; François locking the door...) and tends to confirm that their world boils down to a series of simple, easily recognizable (and therefore perfectly reproducible) actions/images. The fact that this poster-like world is reproducible is confirmed at the end of the film with a very similar and perfectly symmetrical sequence of everyday chores: the only significant, or rather not so significant difference - a mere detail as it turns out - is that one woman (Émilie) has replaced another (Thérèse).

François and Thérèse's idyllic version of the family is certainly very similar to a poster, a colourful advertisement, or the representations of family life as featured in some women's magazines of the 1960s: on the subject, see DeRoo's convincing analysis, which shows that, in *Le Bonheur*, Varda provides a critique (or a parody, one could argue) of such women's magazines as *Elle* or *Marie-Claire*²¹. Without any fear of sounding anachronistic, one could also indulge in some freewheeling intertextuality à la Barthes²² by referring to the famous ad for Nestlé's morning drink Ricoré, aired in France in the 80s and 90s. In it, we

²⁰ See Mark Lee's point on François' 'economy of happiness' ('Le bonheur, ça s'additionne'), **pagination**.

²¹ DeRoo, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

²² *Le Plaisir du texte/The Pleasure of the Text* (Paris : Seuil, 1973): 'Je savoure le règne des formules, le renversement des origines, la désinvolture qui fait venir le texte antérieur du texte ultérieur [...] pp. 58-59. ['I savor the sway of formulas, the reversal of origins, the ease which brings the anterior text out of the subsequent one'].

have the perfect family (wealthy middle-class family in this case) having breakfast in a sunny garden. Everyone, children and adults alike, is smiling and happy; the ad is very colourful and the tune catchy and joyful. The box of Ricoré is bright yellow and so are the breakfast bowls (which, one might note in passing, might remind of sunflowers, both in terms of shape and colour - this is even more noticeable in the 1990s version of the ad). If taken at face value, *Le Bonheur* is very reminiscent of the Ricoré ad. And, in a way, this anachronistic reference helps us understand better what Varda was after and what *Le Bonheur* is really about. As she said herself: 'Dans un monde où les médias nous envoient des images préfabriquées du bonheur, il est intéressant d'en démonter les clichés'²³ [Because we live in a world in which the media keep throwing prefabricated images of happiness at us, it is interesting to try to dismantle such clichés]. *Le Bonheur* is a proleptic antidote to the Ricoré ad. Thérèse/François and their children belong to a smooth, colourful, picture perfect and, of course, very cliché-ridden world. Interestingly, they lead a poster-like life in a world that is itself full of posters, hence the *mise en abyme* effect. In *Le Bonheur*, posters seem to function as mirrors or reflections; as clues that the characters' lives are too smooth, too *papier glacé*. As already mentioned in the example of the shaving scene, it is as if the characters had escaped from the posters and images which are to be found everywhere in the diegetic world. There is a constant dialogue in the film between posters and life, hence the blurring of the borders between the two. 'Reality' looks like an image: the colours and brightness of the diegetic world are very similar to those of the posters that are seen everywhere in the city and they are reinforced by them.

In another Barthesian 'pleasure of the image'-type intertextual trip, one could also look back in time for another type of cliché. The world of *Le Bonheur* is as colourful, light and happy as a Chéret poster²⁴. The bright primary colours of the posters to be found in *Le Bonheur* can of course remind of pop art but the predominance of yellow is also very much in the style of the *fin-de-siècle* poster designer. Thérèse in particular, light, evanescent, luminous, could be a perfect Chéret poster girl²⁵.

The presence of posters everywhere in the film encourages a reading of the diegetic world as cliché and construct. François and Thérèse's world is a bright bubble about to burst and the various posters and images serve as clues of that, for instance when they expose François as a liar: when asked by his wife whether he prefers Brigitte Bardot or Jeanne Moreau, he replies that he likes her, Thérèse, best but the following shot shows posters of both actresses in his workshop. The montage here pinpoints to a small 'crack' or betrayal and, of course, this scene has a proleptic value in that it foreshadows the bigger betrayal to come. Moreover, Émilie looks strikingly similar to some of the images/posters pinned on a door in his workshop (Sylvie). She is an image that he falls in love with and cannot resist; François behaves like a consumer, he has to have her. His outlook on the world is as simple and shiny as a poster. Despite the reference to nature to justify his relationship with Émilie (see the metaphor of the apple orchard), he treats women / family as a commodity, a product. The link between family and product is further reinforced when Émilie jokingly says '40 centimes; c'est pas cher pour une famille'.

More images / clichés: stamps and photographs

²³ DVD interview, bonus material.

²⁴ When asked, during the November 2012 Varda conference organised by Marie-Claire Barnet, whether she was familiar with the work of fin-de-siècle artist Jules Chéret and whether his posters were a source of inspiration for the representation of Thérèse, Varda answered both questions in the negative. The parallel, however, still has the merit of emphasising the poster-like quality of Thérèse.

²⁵ See for instance the Saxoline poster girl, in *La Belle Époque de Jules Chéret. De l'affiche au décor*, ed. by Réjane Bargiel and Ségolène Le Men (Paris, BnF « Les Arts décoratifs », 2010).

Varda keeps insisting, in a rather systematic way, on the connections and similarities between image and 'reality'. See, for instance, the link shot between the birds at the zoo and the bird on the stamp, and conversely, in the same sequence, the shot between the Chagall stamp that Émilie is looking at and François looking at her. Reality becomes an image (birds) and in turn the image/the stamp/the painting become reality (Chagall's newlyweds, 'Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel' [1938-1939] function here as a proleptic *mise en abyme* of the couple François and Émilie will soon make). Varda undeniably encourages the viewer to reflect on the status of the image and its relationship to 'reality'; there is a constant and fluid exchange between the two and, as a consequence, it becomes difficult to disentangle them. In *Le Bonheur*, reality (i.e. the diegetic world) is constantly de-realized through its contact with/contamination by an image or another and, indeed, the entire film seems to have soaked up the bright colours of the images.

There would also be much to say about the use of photos and snapshots in the film, especially wedding photos and snapshots as POV shots (projection of Émilie's mind?) or the photo of François as a widower by the seaside. The photograph inevitably raises questions about the status of the image and, in Varda's *œuvre* as a whole, it has a particular role: 'The still photo, when it appears in Varda's films, appears, inevitably, as an object, and quite frequently as a collection of objects'²⁶. One might wonder, more specifically, how the photo relates to other images in *Le Bonheur*. Photos are frequently associated with a sense of loss and nostalgia in Varda's films²⁷ but this effect is somehow subverted in *Le Bonheur* due to the proximity of so many other images. A sort of cross-contamination occurs, which emphasises that images just circulate; they can easily be replaced and reproduced (that is certainly the case with the coded wedding photo). Just like the postcard in other films by Varda²⁸, the photo is mostly understood here as an object for mass consumption. The personal, the nostalgic that photographs can be imbued with do not catch on for long in *Le Bonheur*. Photographs are just part of a vast collection of images or, more precisely, clichés.

Whether they be film images, posters, stamps, photos, the very *accumulation* or mass presence of images is bound to arouse suspicion as to the nature of the diegetic world. In Dällenbach's words, these embedded images 'bring out the meaning and form of the work'²⁹. Varda seems to be telling us, what if that world was nothing but a mirage, a colourful visual construct, a cliché? Indeed, all visual clues point to the fact that the world in which François, Thérèse and Émilie circulate is fake or at least no more real than the images with which they interact so freely. Via this innovative use of visual *mise en abyme*, *Le Bonheur* can be read as Varda's hidden feminist and anti-consumerist manifesto.

L''ère du soupçon' or 'the unbearable slipperiness of irony'³⁰ in *Le Bonheur*

Critics widely commented on the absence of a narrative voice, on the perceived neutrality of the film, on the fact that there was no judgment passed on François' behaviour for instance, and Varda often got criticized for it. She denied any feminist dimension to *Le Bonheur* and 'when asked whether the title of her film was ironic, [she] baldly refuted the

²⁶ Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda*, p.48.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁸ See Alison Smith's analysis of Varda's *L'Une chante, l'autre pas*, in *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51.

²⁹ *The Mirror in the Text*, p. 8.

³⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's edge: the theory and politics of irony* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 116.

claim³¹. In a way, this uneasiness on Varda's part goes hand in hand with the dialectics of fascination/repulsion for the power of the image, which lies at the heart of the film. As mentioned earlier, the film was often misunderstood by audiences and critics alike. This all seems to refer to the fact that, as pointed out by Hutcheon (and many other theorists of irony such as Muecke or, more recently, Schoentjes)³², irony is indeed a 'risky business' which can be 'unbearably slippery' at times³³ – all the more so when the suspected 'ironist' eschews responsibility and seems to leave the viewer free to decide for themselves what is going on in the film. As DeRoo put it, 'To the very end [...] the film's working-class women appear happy and do not acknowledge the irony of their situations: it is for the viewer to recognize the distinction'³⁴.

Does it make *Le Bonheur* a candidate for 'non-intentional' irony³⁵, i.e. for irony as a reading/viewing grid, as a 'strategy of interpretation'³⁶ (and indeed, one might argue, as one of the most satisfactory of such strategies)? Is irony merely in the 'eye of the beholder' in *Le Bonheur*? Hutcheon argued in *Irony's Edge: the theory and politics of irony* that the most convincing and comprehensive theoretical model for irony would need to encompass three distinct strands within irony theory, namely:

[W]hat is usually called the intentionalist position (ironist only); the reverse position that all irony is a function of reading (interpreter only); and the position that there is a shared responsibility (for both) in the use and attribution of irony.³⁷

In *Le Bonheur*, the very undecidability as to agency and where the ironic 'intentions' lie, if any, leads to a blurring of the film's ethics. Is there a critical or satirical dimension to it? And, if so, what are its targets? *Le Bonheur* is the ultimate visual 'tarte à la crème'; it is fully booby-trapped and it seems that irony is still the best way out (of the cliché). When faced with the recurrent use of visual *mise en abyme*, it is indeed in the viewer's best interest to start questioning the status of the images they are seeing insofar as this increased awareness helps to deconstruct and reject the cliché of the happy family.

From a generic point of view, *Le Bonheur* – which plays with the musical genre (key role of Mozart's music; parody of the sugariness that can be associated with the genre) and, very briefly, with the melodrama – also functions well as a parody of the fairy tale: Thérèse does not make food, she makes 'honey', in François' words; the multiple shots in which François takes Thérèse in his arms after she was pulled out of the river belong to the iconography of Prince Charming and Sleeping Beauty. The film starts where the fairy tale usually ends with a 'And they lived happily ever after' (which could have been an alternative title for the film) and, by quickly disposing of the seeds of melodrama, it manages to retain or regain some sort of 'happily ever after' at the end. The film's circular structure emphasises the similarities between the family walk in the opening credits and at the end. Apart from the change of season, the colour of the sweaters, and a different wife/mother, nothing much has changed. The transition is as smooth as when François was swapping dancing partners at the *bal musette*. This is 'repetition with a difference', i.e. parody according to Hutcheon's definition: parody is 'repetition with critical difference that allows ironic signalling of

³¹ DeRoo, p. 207.

³² Douglas Colin Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969); Pierre Schoentjes, *Silhouettes de l'ironie* (Geneva: Droz, 2007).

³³ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's edge*, p. 9 and p. 116.

³⁴ DeRoo, p. 207.

³⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, p. 118.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

difference at the heart of similarity'³⁸. Indeed, there is more than enough scope for irony or rejection to surface. As Alison Smith put it: 'The process is violent in proportion to the amount which the spectator has invested in the cliché'³⁹. Thérèse's death is but a blip in the colourful and irrepressible, all-powerful, cruel but beautiful, world of the cliché. And one can go much further than DeRoo's approach to *Le Bonheur* as 'feminist critique'. What the film critiques above all else is the siren-like, seductive power of visual clichés (including, but not limited to, that of the perfect wife and mother). Through a series of visual *mises en abyme*, Varda shows happiness as pure visual cliché, and as a perfectly reproducible product. As a thorough and subversive examination of the power of the image / of images, *Le Bonheur* remains to this day one of Varda's - and, indeed, of French Cinema's - most provocative statements.

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³⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody : The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York and London : Methuen, 1985), p. 26.

³⁹ Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda*, p. 43.

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